DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 034 CE 061 120

AUTHOR Merriam, Sharan B.; Clark, M. Carolyn
TITLE Work, Love, and Learning in Adult Life.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 4p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 20-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Adult Learning; *Adults; Educational Research; *Employment; *Life Events; Life Satisfaction; *Love; Marital Satisfaction; Mental Health; Productivity; Quality of Life; Quality of Working Life; Self Actualization; *Well Being

ABSTRACT

To understand how work, love, and learning are interrelated in adults' lives, data were collected in two ways: through a life-history type instrument and through in-depth interviews with 19 men and women. A life event framework was chosen to illustrate the broad constructs of work and love. Respondents identified in two columns major life events from year to year in the areas of work and love; they rated each year for each domain as having been a "good," "okay," or "bad" year. These data were graphed with time as the horizontal axis and the rating as the vertical axis. The result was a dual-vector visual representation of each respondent's pattern of love and work. Respondents also identified significant learning events and the year of their occurrence. The life/learning event form was distributed to over 400 adults in graduate or continuing education courses in North America; 19 respondents who had completed the form were interviewed. Three broad patterns of interaction between the work and love domains were detected in the data: (1) a parallel pattern in which work and love vectors moved together; (2) a second pattern in which one domain remained steady while the other fluctuated; and (3) a pattern of divergence--if one was high, the other was low, the vectors seeming to flow independent of or in opposition to each other. The greatest number of learning events occurred when both work and love were rated "good." (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M C Clark
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

ED245034

WORK, LOVE, AND LEARNING IN ADULT LIFE

Sharan B. Merriam
Department of Adult Education
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602

M. Carolyn Clark
Educational Human Resource Development
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843-3256

When asked what it meant to be a mature, healthy adult, Freud is reported to have said that maturity is the capacity to work and to love. Certainly these are the central social and psychological forces in adult life, and they have been studied extensively, usually separately, although recent attention has been given to how to balance the two. There has been little research, however, on the interaction of the two domains. For example, do things need to be going well in both arenas for one to feel productive? Do activity and energy in one area stimulate activity in the other? Or is the energy devoted to one at the expense of the other? Further, how is learning related to the interaction of work and love? Does more learning occur when things are going well, or when times are difficult? What role does learning play in development? The purpose of this study was to examine how work and love interact, and how the interaction is related to learning in adult life.

The most extensive discussion of the concepts of work and love can be found in Smelser and Erikson (1980). Empirical research on the interaction of love and work is limited. Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers (1983) studied 300 women to find out what contributed to their sense of well-being. They found that employed, married women with children had a high sense of well-being, achieving a sense of mastery from their work and a sense of pleasure from their relationships. Likewise, Vaillant's (1977) longitudinal study of Harvard men found that those with the best mental health had "sustained relationships with loving people" (p. 337) and achieved in their work.

Methodology

Since the focus of our study was to understand how work, love, and learning are interrelated in adults' lives, a qualitative design was chosen as the most appropriate means of investigating this question. Data were collected in two ways: through a life-history type instrument described below and through in-depth interviews with 19 men and women.

A life event framework was chosen to operationalize the broad constructs of work and love. Life events are noteworthy occurrences, "benchmarks in the human life cycle" (Sugarman, 1986, p.131). Respondents were asked to identify, in two columns, major life events from year to year in the areas of work and love. Work was defined as "noteworthy work experiences, paid or volunteer; formal education" and love was broadly defined as "interpersonal relationships, family events; social life; leisure activities."

CE061120

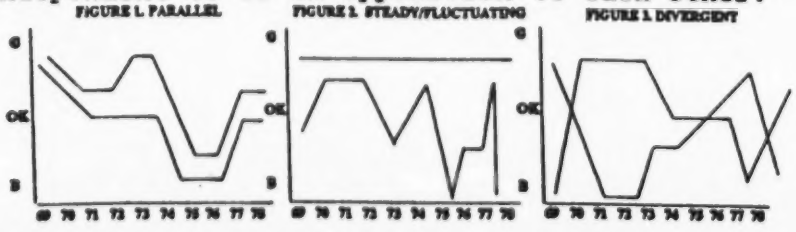
Once these life events were listed, respondents were asked to subjectively rate each year for each domain as having been a "good," an "OK," or a "bad" year. For example, for the year 1976 one man wrote "dropped out of college" under the work column and rated it "bad"; in the love column of the same year the respondent wrote "married" and rated it "good." Respondents were then asked to graph these data, with time as the horizontal axis and the evaluation as the vertical axis. The result is a dual-vector visual representation of each respondent's pattern of love and work. On the second page of the instrument, respondents were asked to identify significant learning events and the year of their occurrence.

This life/learning event form was distributed to over 400 adults in graduate or continuing education courses in North America. In addition, we interviewed 19 respondents who had completed the form and who had volunteered to be interviewed. The final sample consists of 405 adults ranging in age from 20 to 62, with the average age of the participants being 37.6 years. Of the total sample, 112 or 27.7% are men and 293 or 72.3% are women. The sample is predominately white (82%) and well educated (88% are college educated).

We considered the data from this form to be like diary or journal entries documenting, to some extent, a personal life history. Thus both the graphs and the interviews were treated as qualitative data and were analyzed using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Findings

Three broad patterns of interaction between the work and love domains were detected in our data. There is a parallel pattern (n=158) (Fig.1) in which work and love vectors move together; change in one domain is reflected by change in the other. In the second pattern (n=107) (Fig.2) one domain remains steady while the other fluctuates. The third pattern (n=140) (Fig.3) is one of divergence; if one is high, the other is low, and the vectors seem to flow independent of or in opposition to each other.



Our interview data revealed that for each of the three patterns there are several factors unique to each pattern that explains the nature of the interaction. In the parallel pattern, for example, there is a conscious effort to keep the two domains in balance. In the steady/fluctuating pattern, dips in the fluctuating domain, rather than pulling down the steady domain, appear to reinforce the stable character of that domain. In the divergent pattern,

achieving control through work creates a sense of stability. Interestingly, we found no differences in the distribution of these patterns by sex.

Significant learning events were coded as to where they occurred within each person's graph. The greatest number of learning events (600) occurred when both work and love were rated "good." When both domains were rated "OK," 112 learning events were reported. When things were going badly in both domains, only 63 learning events occurred. From our interview data we learned that while more learning occurs in good times, the nature of learning in bad times is somewhat different in character. Difficult times appear to generate major, transformative learning experiences.

Summary

Three distinct patterns of work and love were discovered through a qualitative analysis of 405 life-event graphs and 19 interviews. Further, significant learning intersects with these work/love interactions with more learning occurring in good times than bad.

Our study has implications for practitioners in human services--to psychologists, educators, counselors, social workers, and others who work towards the personal growth and development of adults. By facilitating reflection on both domains of love and work, defined in the broadest possible way to include a vast range of adult experience, and to reflect on significant learning from those life experiences, individuals are being asked to attend to all aspects of their life at one time. Only then can they begin to see the connections between the different aspects of their lives and to note patterns of behavior that link or separate the domains. Such a panoramic view affords an important opportunity for significant personal growth.

References

Baruch, G., Barnett, R., and Rivers, C. (1983). Lifeprints: New patterns of love and work for today's women. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Glaser, B. G., and Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory. Chicago: Aldine.

Smelser, N. J., and Erikson, E. H. (Eds.). (1980). Themes of work and love in adulthood. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sugarman, L. (1986). Life-span development: Concepts, theories and interventions. New York: Methuen.

Vaillant, G. E. (1977). Adaptation to life. Boston: Little, Brown.